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ABSTRACT

In this paper, guilt in literature is considered within the following four categories: private guilt, shared guilt, implied guilt, and public guilt. Among characters in literature that suffer from guilt as a private matter are Arthur Dimmesdale in "The Scarlet Letter," Pip in "Great Expectations," Edna in "The Awakening," and K. in "The Trial." The sharing of guilt can occur either because of the need of one person for another's assurance or assistance, or as the result of complicity. Those characters discussed in this category include Abbie and Eben in "Desire Under the Elms," Biff and Willie Loman in "Death of a Salesman," and Claudius and the Queen in "Hamlet." Works of literature in which guilt is implied include "Oedipus Rex," "Phaedra," "To Kill a Mockingbird," "Grapes of Wrath," and "The Scarlet Letter." Public revelation for wrongdoing is a prominent thematic element in "Antigone," "Billy Budd," and "Crime and Punishment." Suggested readings for each of the categories of guilt include short stories, poems, novels, and drama. (LL)

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# Guilt in Literature

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# Guilt in Literature

A few years ago I came across an item torn from a newspaper column called "Oh, how I wish . . .", in which actress Helen Hayes spoke of her many years of long absences from home and her regret that she had not been able to spend more time with her family, especially her daughter Mary who died at the age of nineteen. "The basis for all grief is guilt," she said at the conclusion of the interview, and I was reminded that Nicholas Rowe, eighteenth century Poet Laureate, had said almost the same thing many years earlier:

> Guilt is the courseeof sorrow, 'tis the fiend,
> Th' avenging fiend, that follows us behind
> With whips and stings.

And while guilt is not justified, in the case of Helen Hayes and in the cases of many others who have had legitimate reasons for what they have done, life and literature abound with examples of its existence, justifiable or not. Because this is true, and because we live in a guilt-ridden age where neuroses are no longer the exception, allowing readers to take a good, hard look at the literature of guilt seems

appropos in our time.

In this study I have attempted to do several things: (1) to categorize guilt in literature as nearly as it is possible to do so (2) to provide at the outset a wide variety of references as a kind of detailed bibliography (3) to provide for reading and analysis a variety of selections from as many of the literary genre as possible.

One could do much, much more, of course. John McKenzie, in his book GUILT Its Meaning and Significance,[1] makes the distinction between objective guilt, for which a person is legally and morally responsible, and subjective guilt, which involves the sense or emotional attitude arising out of real or imagined wrong doing. We have both in literature - sometimes even in the same selection. It remains for the reader, I believe, to decide which one, or whether one, predominates.

In the nineteenth century, a gloomy Hawthorne, speaking in "Young Goodman Brown," called the earth "one stain of guilt . . . ." The twentieth century writer is much more blasé, more subtle. He shows the world as it is, but he allows the reader to find and identify for himself the "mass of public" or private "wrongs." For today's readers, surfeited by symbolism and annoyed by too obvious analogy, demand a more abstruse and sophisticated kind of reading.

American poet and critic Marianne Moore says that literature is "a

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[1] pp. 21, 22.

phase of life."[2] As such, it necessarily concerns itself with what English novelist and critic Virginia Woolf has called the "two edges" of the beauty of the world, "one of laughter, one of anguish, tearing the heart asunder."[3] As we examine the events in a life full of anguish and consider what the causes are, guilt seems to be at the top of the list, perhaps because we must accept full responsibility for most of our problems and troubles. One of the most memorable lines in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex is spoken after Oedipus, in his remorse and grief, has rushed into the palace to blind himself. A messenger, looking after him, says, "The greatest griefs are those we cause ourselves."

Guilt has always been present in the backgrounds of our thinking. In the Book of Acts, Paul admits with his conversion his guilt in supporting the stoning of Stephen, a form of punishment totally opposed to the religious philosophy in which he has been brought up. His conflict is a kind of schizophrenia with which present-day psychiatrists are so well acquainted. Today, when probably more people than ever before are examining their consciences, the guilt feeling has invaded the thinking of practically everyone, not only through the mass media, but also through all the literary genre. Only a time of such intensive introspections could support the enormous popularity of a book or a movie like The Exorcist.

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[2]"Picking and Choosing"

[3]A Room of One's Own

How one categorizes the kinds of guilt will no doubt vary with his background and experiences, but for purposes of organization we may list them as follows, realizing that arriving at exact distinctions is almost impossible and that overlapping is inevitable:

I. Private guilt
II. Shared guilt
III. Implied guilt
IV. Public guilt

## Private Guilt

Guilt begins as a private matter and often remains private. No one with a conscience is immune to feeling of moral culpability, from the time he is old enough to know that some actions are acceptable or "right" and others are not. One feels guilty for so-called sins of commission or omission. He glances at a neighbor's paper during an examination and later finds that his A brings him little satisfaction. He maneuvers himself into a position which someone else should rightfully have or avoids a long-time friend who no longer fits into his social group. He fails to write a long-overdue letter, pay a bill, keep a commitment. Because he is not always sure why he is uncomfortable and less happy that he would like to be, he takes refuge in self-punishment or bursts of anger or rationalization or excuses for his behavior. T.S. Eliot's Prufrock,[4] for example, painfully aware that his is an ineffectual life, comforts himself with "And indeed there will be time. . . there will be time," knowing full well that for him time is running out.

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[4]"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Guilt is a private matter in Paul Wellman's The Chain in which the Reverend John Carlisle wears under his clerical robes the chain which scourges his flesh as a constant reminder of his trespasses, unknown to the reader, but obviously painfully clear to the cleric. In The Scarlet Letter, Arthur Dimmesdale, suffering for the sin of silence in allowing Hester to be punished alone for their sin of adultery bears, either literally or figuratively, the A burned into his flesh. Only the minister himself, in Hawthorne's short story called "The Minister's Black Veil" knows why he feels compelled to cover his face with the veil, in life and in death. The reader of the story neither knows nor is required to know what he has done, to sense the enormity of his sin.

In Dickens' Great Expectations a newly-rich Pip who has been brought up in his sister's home and has known his only kindness as a child from his brother-in-law Joe, realises he is wrong to be secretly ashamed of Joe who comes to London to see him. Edna, in The Awakening by Kate Chopin compensates to her children with excessive bursts of affection and extravagant gifts for what she realizes is not a truly maternal feeling toward them.

Sometimes one is uncomfortable without being certain of any wrong doing. That most men are preoccupied with feelings of guilt is illustrated in Kafka's nightmarish existential novel The Trial in which K., the hero, is arrested, condemned, and finally executed without knowing even so much as the nature of the crime he is supposed to have committed. Nevertheless, as long as he lives, he fights to prove his innocence, assuming that he has done something and feeling compelled to vindicate

himself.

In retrospect, one's childhood activities may cause a person moments of private concern. Looking back, as Wordsworth does in his "spiritual autobiography," The Prelude, a writer may recall excapades similar to those Wordsworth remembers - stealing the animals or birds from another's traps, robbing birds' nests, "borrowing" a boat.

Man's inhumanity to living things other than man may endlessly accuse. Robert P. Tristram Coffin cannot forget the tragic beauty of the pheasant that he sees as it falls to earth after it has been shot; and the dog that a frightened boy refuses to bury comes back to haunt him in a dream in Richard Wilbur's "The Pardon." In "The Trap" by William Beyer a farmer at first congratulates himself for what he has done to the fox that has been killing his chickens, but later makes a feeble excuse to follow the suffering animal to put it out of its misery.

Whatever the guilt is, one lives with it, and most of the time he is alone. But sometimes the burden becomes too heavy and he shares it, either because someone else must know about it or because he needs an accomplice. Then it is that literature moves into the second "phase of life," and we discover the element of shared guilt.

## Shared Guilt

Sharing of guilt, whether through a need for another person's assurance or assistance or through complicity compounds the problems involved. Because he can no longer bear the burden alone, a person may confess to a counselor, a relative, or a friend something he has done. He may share because he fears another person has already guessed his

secret, or he may unwillingly share because he is caught in the act of wrong doing and has no choice. Finally, two or more people may be involved in whatever is happening, and while one may be the aggressor, complicity makes anyone involved culpable as an active participant.

Oenone in Racine's Phaedra watches with deep concern the signs of anguish in Theseus's queen, Phaedra. As a trusted nurse and companion, she insists on knowing what is wrong and finally learns of Phaedra's incestuous love for her stepson Hippolytus. Phaedra is at first obviously relieved to have someone else know her secret, as we see in these lines:

> And yet I thought to . . .
> . . . hide from mortal eyes so dark a thing.
> But then your sobs and words o're mastering me,
> I told you all; and now I am not sorry -

Later, however, when she learns with horror that Oenone has betrayed her trust, she can no longer say, "I am not sorry," and she commits suicide.

A more modern drama, Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms, although it deals first with private guilt when Eben bribes his brothers to give up their shares of the family farm, later and more damagingly concerns the guilt he shares with Abbie, his father's new young wife. In the last dramatic scene of the play, after Eben has notified the sheriff that Abbie has murdered their baby, he suddenly realizes his own responsibility:

> Abbie. I got t' take my punishment - t' pay for my sin.
> Eben. Then I want t' share it with ye.
> Abbie. Ye didn't do nothin'.
> Eben. I put it in yer head. I wisht he was dead. I as much as urged ye t' do it!
> Abbie. No. It was me alone.
> Eben. I'm as guilty as yev be! He was the child of our sin.

In Henry James' short story "The Tree of Knowledge," a mother, a son,

and a longtime family friend share the guilt of deception. Each first knows privately that the father of the family is not "the Master," but a very mediocre artist. The sharing comes about with the slow realization that not one of them is really alone in this knowledge.

The kind of sharing which comes about when one person stumbles upon another's misdeed is perhaps best illustrated in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Biff, the son of Willie Loman, the salesman, looks up his father in Boston on one occasion and unexpectedly finds him in his hotel room with a woman. Torn between fury with his father and loyalty for his mother Linda, Biff is never the same again - nor is Willie. Ultimately, Willie, like Phaedra, sees nothing for which to live and kills himself.

Three hundred years earlier Shakespeare had dealt in Hamlet with a son's discovery of his uncle's crime and his mother's lack of faithfulness. Young Hamlet's contrivance of a dramatic presentation in which both his Uncle Claudius and his mother see themselves revealed in their guilt so unnerves Claudius that he finds himself unable to pray:

> . . . Pray I cannot,
> Tho inclination be as sharp as will.
> My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
> And, like a man to stronger purpose bound,
> I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
> And both neglect.

As for the Queen, who has too hastily married Claudius, as she trembles under her son's verbal lash, she tries to silence him:

> O Hamlet speak no more!
> Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
> And there I see such black and grained spots
> As will not leave their tinct.

Complicity, Shakespeare seems to be saying, "smells to Heaven." But

complicity goes on and on in literature - from Tennyson's Idylls of the King to Madame Bovary to Peyton Place.

The weight of guilt may be somewhat less when it is a shared thing, but a twentieth century poet Edwin Markham has put into words the danger of this sharing:

> Why should you think some other one would keep
> The secret that you could not keep yourself?

My character in literature would have been more sure of the truth of this than Queen Phaedra!

## Implied Guilt

By killing his father and marrying his mother, Oedipus in Sophocles' play Oedipus Rex fulfills the prophecy that was been made for him. But is Oedipus, whose life has been irrevocably planned by the gods, to be blamed for crimes which he tries not to commit and can not avoid? We remember, too, that in Racine's Phaedra the Queen's helplessness in her guilty love is due to the influence of Aphrodite. Can we, then, blame her for what she can not prevent? Can the reader condemn the childlike Boo Radley in To Kill a Mockingbird because he presumably kills a man to protect a child he has come to love? Can we really blame Bedevere in "The Passing of Arthur" because he at first only pretends to follow the dying King Arthur's order to throw the jeweled sword Excalibur into the lake? After all, the reader does not know exactly why he wants to save it, what he plans to do with it.

In short, in literature, we often find the mere semblance of guilt or the implication that a character or a segment of society is blameable. For instance, in Kafka's "Metamorphosis" we may blame the entire family's

dependence for the catastrophic change from the son Gregor to the huge and relatively helpless insect Gregor. We realize what the pattern of living has been as we watch the changes in family members when they can no longer lean on Gregor. We may say that an indifferent society is to blame for the economic and social ills of the family in Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath. Perhaps the cold and calculating Roger Chillingworth is really to blame for Hester's downfall in The Scarlet Letter. After all, he sends her off alone to make her way in a strange and dangerous place!

Another suggested implication comes about through the way a poem or a short story or a novel can make the reader feel. Because he identifies with a character or a situation, he may be personally affected by what he reads and may feel that it applies directly to him. A poem like Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" as well as the television play by the same name, or a short story like Eudora Welty's "A Visit of Charity" or "A Worn Path" may make the reader uncomfortably aware that he has not really tried to "walk in the shoes" of the old people he knows. Few can read "Metamorphosis," mentioned earlier, without privately wondering how they would react if somemember of their family were to be suddenly and grotesquely changed. The poem "Days" by Emerson may make one uncomfortable about the time he wastes, while poems like Dylan Thomas's "The Hunchback in the Park" or Hart Crane's "The Idiot" may jolt him into an awareness of others' handicaps and his own insensitiveness to them. He may feel a new compassion for the lonely people of the world after he reads Hardy's "Nobody Comes," Chekhov's "The Horse," or the Lennon-McCartney "Eleanor Rigly," or feel

guilty for his lack of appreciation of life after he reads Thornton Wilder's Our Town, echoing Emily's plaintive "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? -- every, every minute?" And how can anyone get through a tinseled, commercialized Christmas without cringing, after reading Ferlinghetti's "Christ Climbed Down"?

The astute person is aware of the background struggle of minority groups even as he follows the story line in Steinbeck's "Flight" or The Pearl; and he can hardly be unaware of the religious fanaticism, the ignorance, and the parental neglect which provide background for a Flannery O'Connor story like "The River."

The implication of guilt may come with an actual clue - a long iron-gray hair on the pillow in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," fluttering pink ribbons in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," a crumpled bill on the floor in Ben Ames Williams' "They Grind Exceeding Small," "three or four" mysterious ruby-red drops in a wine goblet in Poe's "Ligeia." Small things, they make literature more fascinating because they are clues to situations which are not immediately obvious.

Henry James says this in The Art of Fiction: "The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern . . . this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience."

## Public Guilt

O World, no world, but mass of public wrongs. . . .[5]

Public guilt, which appears at first to be the most humiliating, the most obvious, the most common of the types, is actually the most deceptive and the hardest to understand. For what constitutes guilt in the eyes of many may be the result of the kind of vindicative madness generated by a crowd or mob. What appears in one generation to be guilt may be glory in the next. The so-called villain of one time may later be regarded as a hero or a heroine.

For the best example in literature of crowd hysteria we have only to turn to the greatest book in the world, the Bible, and to the crucifixion of Christ. For the shift in emphasis over the generations one can read the biography of such characters in history as Martin Luther or World War I spy Edith Cavell. As for the third category, we have only to look at two American writers, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, both regarded somewhat as questionable literary figures during their lifetimes and now included on every list of eminent American authors.

Martyrdom, though the person is proved guilty, has a tendency to gain sympathy with time and often to reveal a strange kind of reversal in public punishment. Though Joan is burned at the stake in Shaw's Saint Joan, it is King Charles, according to the epilogue, who suffers most. Though Antigone in Sophocles' play Antigone dies for her guilt in attempting to bury the body of her brother Polyneices, it is King Creon, who orders her

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[5]The Spanish Tragedy, p/

death, whose suffering is greater. Billy Budd loses his life in Melville's Billy Budd for killing Claggart, but Captain Vere, who orders the hanging, forever loses his peace of mind. And who can be sure, after reading of John Brown's October 31, 1859, letter to his wife and children, whether the ending of the man's life is defeat or victory.

Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment is as much a novel of Raskolnikov's vindication as of his guilt. Tess of Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles is executed for her crime, but we know that Angel Clare undoubtedly suffers more than does Tess.

Public revelation for wrong doing eliminates the need for concealment which Shakespeare spoke of as being "like the worm i' the bud" - harmful from the beginning of things. The very nature of public confession appears to have a tendency to purge the soul of guilt; and with the curious kind of honesty which comes with public acknowledgement and public criticism comes, apparently, an equally strange kind of peace.

## Summary

Through literature, then, we see the effect of guilt on the strong and on the weak. One character rises to majestic heights; another, unable to face his problems, destroys himself.

The deliberate use of The Scarlet Letter in each of the categories reveals the difficulties of making exact decisions as to the kind of guilt involved in a selection. Deciding is not always easy, but therein lies much of the fascination in a highly subjective study of this kind.

## Private Guilt ( Reading Selections )

Short Stories

"I'm a Fool" Sherwood Anderson
"Roger Malvin's Burial" Nathaniel Hawthorne
"The Doctor" Andre Dubus
"The Tell-Tale Heart" Edgar Allan Poe
"The Belled Buzzard" Irwin S. Cobb
"Counterparts" James Joyce
"Everything That Rises Must Converge" Flannery O'Connor

Poems

Selections from Spoon River Anthology Edgar Lee Masters
"The Pardon" Richard Wilbur
"Forgive My Guilt" Robert P. Tristram Coffin
"Skipper Ireson's Guilt" John Greenleaf Whittier
"The Bishop Orders His Tomb" Robert Browning
Excerpts from The Prelude William Wordsworth

Novel
Novella The Death of Ivan Ilyich Leo Tolstoi

Drama Medea Euripedes

## Shared Guilt (Reading Selections)

Short Stories

"The Lagoon" Joseph Conrad
"The Necklace" Guy de Maupassant
"The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" Mark Twain
"A Municipal Report" O Henry
"Barn Burning" William Faulkner
"God Sees the Truth, but Waits" Leo Tolstoi

Poems

"Confession Overheard on a Subway" Kenneth Fearing
"Rime of the Ancient Mariner" Samuel Taylor Coleridge
"Lord Randal " anonymous
"Lancelot and Elaine" Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Novel Ethan Frome Edith Wharton
Novella The Fall Albert Camus

Drama Excerpts from Macbeth William Shakespeare
Death of a Salesman Arthur Miller
or
All My Sons

## Implied Guilt (Reading Selections)

Short Stories

"The Garden- Party" Katherine Mansfield
"The River" Flannery O'Connor
"A Piece of String" Guy de Maupassant
"De Mortuis" John Collier
"Babylon Revisited" Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald
"What Hurts Is That I Was in a Hurry" Vladimir Cherkassski
"Haircut" Ring Lardner

Poems

"Days" Ralph Waldo Emerson
"The Rabbit Hunter" Robert Frost
"Out Out -" Robert Frost
"Man with the Hoe" Edwin Markham
"My Last Duchess" Robert Browning
"The Idiot" Hart Crane
"The Hunchback in the Park" Dylan Thomas

Novel
Novella
Noon Wine Katherine Anne Porter
Rain Somerset Maugham

Drama

(or Trifles)
A Jury of Her Peers Susan Glaspell

## Public Guilt (Reading Selections)

### Short Stories

"Paul's Case" Willa Cather
"Dry September" William Faulkner
"Hands" Sherwood Anderson
"A Thanksgiving Visitor" Truman Capote

### Poems

Selections from Spoon River Anthology Edgar Lee Masters
"Carol - New Style" Stephen Vincent Benet
"London" William Blake
"Salem" Richard Eberhart

### Novel

Lord Jim Joseph Conrad or
Billy Budd Herman Melville

### Drama

The Lark Jean Anouilh or
The Andersonville Trial Saul Levitt